

## Strategies to Assist Low-Literate Health Care Consumers

***Providers can create a “shame-free” environment where low-literate patients can seek help without feeling stigmatized.<sup>1-3</sup>***

- Providing surrogate readers can help patients with reading difficulties understand key information. Family members also can fill this role and reinforce medical information at home.
- Prior to an appointment, clinic or office staff can tell a patient what information will be needed — medicines they are already taking, what kind of insurance they have, as well as the reason they are seeing the doctor. Staff also might suggest that the patient bring a family member.
- Tailoring medication schedules to fit a patient’s daily routine, color coding medicines, and using daily events as reminders can help increase compliance.
- To verify that patients understand, or to uncover health beliefs and tailor teaching, providers might ask patients to “teach back” by repeating or restating the instructions as the patient might tell a friend (i.e., “Can you tell me in your own words what we have discussed?”).

A study conducted at San Francisco General Hospital found improved glycemic control when physicians used the “teach back” method with patients with diabetes.<sup>4</sup>

### Low Health Literacy and Verbal Communication<sup>5</sup>

Patients with poor health literacy tend to be more responsive to information designed to promote patient action, motivation, and self-empowerment than detailed facts.

- If a provider thinks a patient is having difficulty understanding written or spoken directions, a good approach is to say, “A lot of people have trouble reading and remembering these materials. How can I help you?”
- Use commonly understood words. For instance, use “keeps bones strong” instead of “prevents osteoporosis.”
- Slow down and take time to listen to a patient’s concerns. Create an atmosphere of respect and comfort. Build trust with the patient.
- Limit information given to patients at each visit. Remember that less than half of the information provided to patients during each visit is retained.

*continued on back*

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## Oral and visual tools help patients absorb new information, which increases learning.<sup>6,7</sup>

Pretest material to ensure that your strategy is acceptable and appropriate for the intended audience.

- **Diagrams or pictures.** Visuals help the patient understand the action recommended. Patients also can take them home as reminders. The behavior should be clear and language easy to understand.
- **Audiotaped instructions.** Tapes of one to five minutes hold attention and are more effective than longer tapes. Limit the number of messages given (no more than two). Focus on behaviors rather than facts.
- **Videotapes.** Videos with run times of eight minutes or less are the most helpful. The most valuable video will be interactive or instructional (on-screen activity or accompanying workbook).
- **Interactive computer programs.** Touch-screen computer programs that are user-friendly at a low reading level, and use graphics to illustrate intended behavior are most appropriate.

### Illustrations Help Patients Visualize Instructions



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#### Breathing and coughing exercises for heart surgery patients.

After several deep breaths, breathe in slowly through your nose. Open your mouth, stick out your tongue, and cough hard three times as you breathe out.

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## References

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